

VICTORIOUS UNION

by Oliver Optic

Chapter 16: The Lieutenant's Daring Exploits

Captain Breaker was perplexed when his ship came alongside the enemy and was made fast to her, for things were not working according to the usual rules made and provided for such occasions, and Captain Rombold was evidently resorting to some unusual tactics. The two steamers were of about the same height above water, so their decks were very nearly on a level.

The men with muskets on both sides were reloading their weapons, and those with navy revolvers were discharging them at the enemy; but the officers of divisions concealed their men behind the bulwarks when the order to board did not come.

Christy saw the perplexity of the commander at his side, and it was evident to both of them that some unusual strategy was to be adopted, and Captain Breaker did not intend to fall into a trap if he could avoid it. They could see nothing that looked suspicious except the position of the enemy's force on the starboard side of the ship.

Before the captain could stop him, the first lieutenant had leaped into the mizzen rigging, and ascended far enough to obtain a view of the quarter deck over the bulwarks, while the commander walked aft far enough to accomplish the same purpose by looking through the aperture made by the shot which had carried away the wheel of the enemy, without exposing himself to the fire of the seamen on board of her.

Christy's action occupied but the fraction of a minute; but several muskets and revolvers were discharged at him in this brief time. Letting go his hold of the rigging, he dropped to the deck before the captain could see what he was doing; and it was supposed that the daring officer had been brought down by the shots fired at him.

"Second division, follow me!" he cried, as he picked up the cutlass he had dropped.

About thirty men rushed to the quarter-deck, hurried on by Mr. Walbrook. Christy leaped upon the rail, with the cutlass in his right hand, and the revolver in his left, and dropped down upon the quarter deck of the Tallahatchie, upon a squad of seamen who were lying low behind a thirty-pounder, whose carriage was close to the bulwark, the piece pointed forward.

The first lieutenant had seen from his position in the mizzen rigging the trap which had been set for the crew of the *Bellevite*. They were expected to leap to the rail, and cut away the boarding nettings—not always used, but were on this occasion—and then drop down to the deck. The first command would naturally have been to "Repel boarders;" but this was not given, and no fighting was to be done till the boarders reached the ship, when the thirty-pounder, doubtless loaded with grape or shrapnel, was to mow down the invaders of the deck.

Christy's men poured down after him, and before the crew of the gun, who had no doubt been



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ordered to conceal themselves, could get upon their feet they were cut down by the impetuous tars from the *Bellevite*. It was the work of but a moment. Christy had taken some pains to have the opinion of Captain Rombold that American seamen were inferior to British circulated, and the men evidently intended to prove that they were the equals of any sailors afloat.

"Swing the muzzle of the gun to starboard!" shouted Christy, as he took hold with his own hands to point the piece, which was in position in a moment.

Captain Rombold stood but a short distance from the stump of the mizzen mast with a cutlass in his hand. He rushed forward to rally his crew; and he seemed to be rendered desperate by the failure of the scheme to which he had resorted. At this moment Christy heard Captain Breaker shout the order to board, and the men were springing to the rail, and tearing away the boarding netting.

"Stand by the lanyard!" cried the first lieutenant on the quarter-deck of the enemy, and he had sighted the piece himself in the absence of any regular gun crew. "Fire!"

The cloud of smoke concealed all of the deck forward of the mizzen mast, and Christy could not see what effect had been produced by the charge of grape, or whatever it was. At any rate the men the commander had rallied for a charge did not appear.

The smoke was blown away in a minute or so, and the *Bellevite's* sailors had made a lodgment on the deck of the enemy. They were led by the officers of the divisions, and were rushing over to the starboard, where the enemy's men had been concentrated. They were brave men, whether English or not, and the moment they could see the boarders, they rushed at them by command of their officers; but they pushed forward, as it were, out of a heap of killed and wounded, those who had fallen by the grape-shot intended to decimate the ranks of the loyal band.

Christy rallied his men as soon as they had done their work in the vicinity of the thirty-pounder, and ordered them to join their division under the command of the third lieutenant. But the seamen on the part of the Confederates seemed to be dispirited to some extent by the bad beginning they had made, and by the heap of slain near them. Captain Rombold lay upon the deck, propped up against the mizzen mast. He looked as pale as death itself; but he was still directing the action, giving orders to his first lieutenant. Two of his officers were near him, but both of them appeared to be severely wounded.

The battle was raging with fearful energy on the part of the loyal tars, and with hardly less vigor on the part of the enemy, though the latter fought in a sort of desperate silence. The wounded commander was doing his best to reinspire them; but his speech was becoming feeble, and perhaps did more to discourage than to strengthen them.

At this stage of the action Graines, closely followed by his twenty men, sprang over the starboard bulwarks, and fell upon the enemy in the rear. Finding themselves between an enemy in front and rear, they could do no more; for it was sure death to remain where they were, and they fled precipitately to the fore-castle.

"Quarter!" shouted these men, and the same cry came from the other parts of the deck.

"Haul down the flag, Mr. Brookfield!" said the commander in a feeble tone.

The first lieutenant of the *Tallahatchie*, with his handkerchief tied around his leg, directed a wounded quartermaster to strike the colors, and three tremendous cheers from the victorious crew of



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the Bellevite rent the air. Captain Breaker had come on board of the enemy, sword in hand, and had conducted himself as bravely as the unfortunate commander of the prize.

The moment he saw Christy he rushed to him with both hands extended, and with a smile upon his face. The four hands were interlocked, but not a word was spoken for the feelings of both were too big for utterance. A loyal quartermaster was ordered to hoist the American ensign over the Confederate flag which had just been hauled down.

The situation on board of the prize was so terrible that there was no danger of an attempt to recapture the vessel, and immediate attention was given to the care of the wounded, the survivors in each vessel performing this duty under its own officers.

Mr. Brookfield, the executive officer of the Tallahatchie, was wounded in the leg below the knee, but he did not regard himself as disabled, and superintended the work of caring for the sufferers. Mr. Hungerford, the second lieutenant, appeared to be the only principal officer who had escaped uninjured; while Mr. Lenwold, the third lieutenant, had his arm in a sling in consequence of a wound received from a splinter in the early part of the action. These gentlemen, who had seemed like demons only a few minutes before, so earnest were they in the discharge of their duties, were now as tender and devoted as so many women.

Captain Breaker directed his own officers to return to the deck of the Bellevite and provide for the wounded there; but they were few in number compared with those strewn about the deck of the prize. While the Confederate ship had been unable to discharge her guns, and the officers were using their utmost exertions to repair the disabled steering apparatus, the Bellevite had had a brief intermission of the din of battle, during which the wounded had been carried below where the surgeon and his mates had attended to their injuries.

It was ascertained that only six men had been killed during the action, and their silent forms had been laid out in the waist. Seventeen men were in their berths in the hospital or on the tables of the surgeon, eight of whom had been wounded by the muskets and revolvers of the enemy as the ship came alongside the prize. Four others had just been borne to the cockpit with wounds from pikes and cutlasses.

The loss of the enemy was at least triple that of the Bellevite, a large number of whom had fallen before the murderous discharge of the thirty-pounder on the quarter-deck, which had been intended to decimate the ranks of the loyal boarders; and, raking the column as the men poured into the ship, it would probably have laid low more than one in ten of the number. This was an original scheme of Captain Rombold; and but for the coolness and deliberation of Captain Breaker, and the daring of his chief officer, it must have been a terrible success. As it was, the Confederate commander, who was the only foreign officer on board, "had been hoisted by his own petard."

Christy had done all that required his attention on board of the Bellevite, and he paid another visit to the deck of the Tallahatchie, where he desired to obtain some information which would enable him the better to understand the action which had just been fought. He was especially anxious to ascertain the condition of the Armstrong gun which had been disabled by the first shot of Blumenhoff with the midship Parrot. As he went on deck, he saw Captain Rombold, seated in an arm-chair his cabin steward had brought up for him, with his right leg resting on a camp stool.



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“Good-morning, Mr. Passford,” said the wounded commander, with a slight smile on his pale face. “Comment allez-vous ce matin?” (How do you do this morning?)

“Très bien, Monsieur le capitaine. Je suis bien fâché que vous êtes blessé. (Very well, Captain. I am very sorry that you are wounded.) You need the attention of the surgeon, sir,” replied the loyal officer.

“I take my turn with my men, Mr. Passford, and my officers do the same. The fortune of war is with you again, and I congratulate you on the success which has attended you. I saw that it was you who upset my plan for receiving your boarders. I was confident, with that device of mine, I should be able to beat off your boarders, and I intended to carry your deck by boarding you in turn. I think your commander can give you the credit of winning the victory for the Bellevite in his despatches; for I should have killed more of your men with that thirty-pounder than you did of mine, for I should have raked the column. You saved the day for the United States when you ran up the mizzen rigging and unmasked my battery. You are a gentleman and a magnanimous enemy, Mr. Passford, and I congratulate you on your promotion, which is sure to come. But you look pale this morning.”

“One of your revolvers had very nearly pinked me when I was in the rigging; for the ball passed between my arm and my side, and took out a piece of the former, Captain Rombold,” replied Christy, who was beginning to feel languid from the loss of blood, for the drops of red fluid were dropping from the ends of his fingers. “But you exaggerate the service I rendered; for Captain Breaker, suspecting something from the position in which your men were drawn up, had dropped a hawser port, and intended to look through the aperture made by one of our solid shots. He would have discovered your trap.”

“He could not have seen the gun or the men.” At that moment Christy sank down upon the deck.

